

GEORGE MILLER, 2000, ON FAIRNESS AND EFFICIENCY: THE PRIVATISATION OF THE PUBLIC INCOME OVER THE PAST MILLENNIUM

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Review by Dr. Mason Gaffney, Riverside, CA

George Miller, to my great sorrow, has died, but leaves us this legacy: and what a legacy it is! This is more than Miller's Masterpiece; it is one of the great Georgist documents of all time. One might nominate it as THE greatest, out of hundreds, but comparisons are odious, so suffice it to say "masterpiece". It is ours now, to use as Dr. Miller would have wanted. Like George's *Progress and Poverty*, it is both a call to action and a cultural treasure.

George J. Miller, MD, FRCP, was Professor of Epidemiology at the University of London, and a senior member of the Medical Research Council, Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine. He had a long-standing and activist interest in Georgism, buttressed by prodigious research. In about 1996 he published an article on Georgist policy in *The Lancet*, although this is otherwise a medical journal, probably the premier one. This speaks to his influence with his peers, and their willingness to be influenced.

The Policy Press of The University of Bristol specializes in the sociology of poverty, especially in Britain. Its focus is comparable to that of The Urban Institute in Washington, D. C. (where our own respected Walter Rybeck was for years the Editor). It deals with poverty, social services, aging, delivering medical care, family policy, "urban regeneration," welfare programs, immigrants, social insurance, workfare, public health, the disabled, social exclusion, homelessness, begging, mental health, housing, orphans, skills training, and so on. That is, they come at poverty from the gritty end of direct contact and direct action, somewhat like LBJ's "War on Poverty". George Miller speaks their language and knows their thoughts, but redirects them to the root causes of poverty. He documents the failure of "free" markets when encumbered by monopoly and speculation in land, and by our counterproductive tax systems that "shoot anything that moves", penalize people both for hiring and working, and tax goods instead of bads. He also scores the futility and failure of cosmetic welfare-statism that treats symptoms with tokens and placebos. He clearly directs readers to the unfair maldistribution of property, and to the Georgist remedy.

We may assume that many medics genuinely want to end poverty. We may also assume that some others develop a vested interest in perpetuating the causes of poverty, so they may continue their livelihoods, rich or modest, by meliorating it without fully curing it. If there are as many of the first kind as there are of the second, Miller is tapping a huge new clientele for our message. The Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, led at that time by Ted Gwartney, helped support the costs of publication – and it is beautifully published, indeed.

The style is highly literate and readable, jargon-free, cant-free, and crisp. It remains readable and absorbing, in spite of its length and occasional discursiveness, because it is all meat: fact upon fact upon fact, all made relevant to its central

theme. As Miller writes, ". . . the record of Rent and its role in the Welfare State has all the richness of English history, a richness I have sought to convey." He has succeeded, with appalling erudition and specifics that would shame Winston Churchill. Besides being a good read, this is a major reference work, and will be well-thumbed by scholars for generations to come.

The MS is well organized overall, and also would benefit by tying up some loose ends with introductions and summaries, and adding a few more "signposts" to alert the reader when a subject ends and a new one begins. The scholarship is formidable, with hundreds of citations to both primary and secondary sources. The coverage is broad and interdisciplinary, but all organized around a central theme that Miller never lets his readers forget: private rent-taking divides society into rich and poor, and the ill health and low productivity of the poor is primarily the result of that. It deals with many cognate topics: public health, sociology, history of land tenure, history of taxation, economic theory, socio-biological theory, the welfare state, housing, and the history of ideas. It treats every one of those heavily, i. e. with great detail, research, and erudition.

Miller spices it throughout with telltale personal details of the persons involved, e. g. that Lord Rosebery's wife was the former Hannah Rothschild, that Stafford Cripps was nephew to Sydney Webb, and that Gladstone's fortune came from his father's compensation for his slaves emancipated in Jamaica and Guiana – money that he used to buy English land he could use to live on the labor of others in a different way. Such fascinating factoids and titillating tidbits would do justice to a journalist keeping his readers awake, but they do not cheapen Miller's product because they reinforce his point that England's political leaders were bound up with the banking-landowning-slaveowning-military classes, the universal comity of property with a common interest in exploiting labor and raising rents and undergirding land values. Miller makes English high society seem like one unified, extended conversation among friends and relatives or, at worst, courteous adversaries at cricket or polo.

He does not spare academic economists, and shows how poorly they have been regarded by members of other professions, and the general public: by everyone, that is, except the rent-taking class who patronize and support them. He deals with them one by one, showing remarkable familiarity with their works, and deep understanding thereof. Here he is, for example, on the subject of imputed rent.

"Rent represents not what is necessarily realized, but the price the productive sector judges worth paying to gain the economic advantages that make the site prime in quality. In effect, the holder of a site kept in an unproductive state holds an imputed Rent, for the landholder still possesses the ability to enjoy the site (even if he neglects (continued on page 8)

GEORGE MILLER (from page 7)

to do so), Rent exists for the landlord ... whether or not the land is occupied by owner or tenant, the proof being that he can sell it. " – p. 66.

Few academic economists see that point at all, let alone so clearly and cogently. Indeed, many who consider themselves to be Georgists retreat into defensive mode when challenged with the "poor widow" argument – as the late Bob Tideman put it, the claim that "the poor people own all the land".

How is it that Dr. Miller, with no studies in economics, but his brain cells crammed with advanced training in epidemiology, can see basic and even subtle economics so clearly in, as it were, his spare time? It bolsters the case, expounded by many of us recently, that economics, as taught in most colleges today, is more a barrier than an aid to clear thinking. This work is truly interdisciplinary, especially among economics, history, and Dr. Miller's profession, human health.

A fascinating section is on eugenics, and how it took on the role of Malthusianism after the latter seemed dispelled by the industrial revolution, the development of new lands, chemical wonders like the Haber-Bosch process for fixing nitrogen, and genetic advances like those of Luther Burbank in the west and G.W. Carver in the southeast. Eugenics (ignoring Carver's African ancestry) was highly fashionable and respectable, even liberal, from the time of Charles Darwin and Francis Galton clear until Adolf Hitler reduced it to shame. The pro-Nazi movement among elements of the British and French aristocracies before W.W. II fused easily with Teutonism in Germany in the guise of eugenics. Would that Dr. Miller were with us today to help put down modern revivals of eugenics as expressed by Charles Murray of The American Enterprise Institute and Richard Herrnstein of Harvard (*The Bell Curve*) and Greg Clark of U.C. Davis (*A Farewell to Alms*).

A quick tour through Miller's chapters conveys his great breadth. One and Two are on the close causal relationship of poverty as cause with sickness and mortality as effects. He shows causation by common-sense in plain prose, free of "black box" techniques. Three is basic law of rent. Four is on unemployment, showing that job insecurity is a cause of ill health. Five is on palliatives of the welfare state, and their failure. Six is on housing, and how squalid housing impairs health and longevity. Seven is on land-value taxation as a remedy. Eight, Nine and Ten are on feudal tax history as a precedent for modern taxation of land values. Eleven and Twelve are on the failures of England's token remedies for unemployment. Thirteen and Fourteen are on the history of the movement for land-value taxation in England, 1880 to date.

The bare summary above cannot do justice to the richness of the overall MS. It is a kind of cultural treasure that could lead one to a lifetime of study - and it will also stimulate action, which is Miller's objective.

The printed volume is only about half of Miller's origi-

nal MS – Bristol's Policy Press cut it down to lower the price. That was wise at the time, but more serious scholars will want access to the unprinted parts, the life work of a genius of the social sciences, still sequestered. With today's technology it would be economical to post them on line. Let us hope that Miller's heirs and assigns do so, and soon.

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